



War on terror drives Arab actor to "Zigzigland"

By Lin Noueihed

Thu Dec 14, 7:38 AM ET

Bashar Daas comes from Zigzigland, an imaginary country just below South America where people respect Arabs and he always has cash to pay the utility bills.

It's not that Daas is ashamed of admitting he is Palestinian in Hollywood but, as a taxi driver waiting for his big break in acting, he wants to avoid the inevitable political debate once passengers realize "that is where suicide bombers come from."

"Driving to Zigzigland" takes a wry look at the experiences of Arabs in the United States since the September 11, 2001 attacks were carried out by 19 young Arab men.

It follows Daas, who plays himself, as he tries to raise in 24 hours enough cash to pay a bill and stop the U.S. Department of Homeland Security from deporting him. In that time, a flow of passengers engage him on everything from whether U.S. soldiers should be in Iraq to whether Cat Stevens has joined al Qaeda.

"Bashar kept getting terrorist roles and I wanted to make my own film," said Nicole Ballivian, an American who wrote and directed "Zigzigland," a small-budget production in which all the actors and crew worked for free.

"Most of this stuff happened to him or, if not, to other taxi drivers. We took the bedtime stories and put them together."

In the film, Daas shows up to a movie audition, only to find out he would be playing a terrorist. He turns the job down.

"This is my first big role. I've done mainly student films or Mexican films where I said nothing," explained Daas after a screening of "Zigzigland" at the Dubai film festival this week.

"If it is really a good film then it is always a terrorist role but I did not go to America to stab my people in the back."

The film sends up the U.S.-led "war on terror" and mocks the misconceptions Arabs face in the United States.

In one scene, an FBI agent shows up at Daas's flat to ask if he knows anyone who is planning jihad. In another, a Jewish couple mistake Daas for an Israeli and agree that eliminating the Palestinians could be a good idea.

Only when he has dropped his passengers off does Daas drop his bombshell.

"Zigzigland" premiered at the Cairo film festival this month but has yet to show in the United States or Europe, where audiences can be sensitive about criticism of Israel.

Entirely self-financed at the paltry sum of \$50,000 the film still has no distributor, said executive producer Anas Khalaf.

"We hope no one will fight us because these are real stories," said Daas, who hails from the holy city of Jerusalem.

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ALJAZEERA.NET

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2006
10:54 MECCA TIME, 7:54 GMT

Bid to unravel 'bad Arab' cliché

By Motez Bishara in Dubai

The 3rd Dubai International Film Festival took a giant leap towards combating racial stereotyping in the film industry when it hosted 'Operation Cultural Bridge', a panel discussion late last week.

Moderator Riz Khan [Al Jazeera English] opened the debate with a question to director Oliver Stone whether Middle Eastern characters have been unfairly characterised by the film industry.



Bashar Da'as plays himself in *Driving to Zigzagland*

Khan was referencing a documentary film in the festival called *Reel Bad Arabs* which chronicled 40 years of Arab demonisation on screen.

But Stone was unconvinced.

"I think that you can say the same thing for the Chinese or the Jewish or the blacks. I think that any minority can feel threatened by Hollywood. Hollywood has become a synonym for the monster and I think that's unfair," he said.

"If you focus on any one thing you can find what you want."

Aladdin and the ear

Stone also recalled seeing images of Arab characters in cartoons which he thought were positive, something Jack Shaheen, the narrator of *Reel Bad Arabs*, and writer of the book by the same name, specifically counters.

The 1992 Disney cartoon *Aladdin* "recycled every old Hollywood stereotype of bad Arabs", Shaheen said, citing the film's line "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home."

Shaheen's documentary alluded to dozens of films, the worst of them being *Delta Force* [1986], where an American aircraft is hijacked by Palestinian terrorists who indiscriminately kill passengers; *True Lies* [1994], the Schwarzenegger action film where Middle Eastern terrorists steal nuclear weapons, and *Rules of Engagement* [2000], starring Tommy Lee Jones and Samuel Jackson, where Yemeni civilians, including women and children, conspire to fight against US Marines.



Jack Shaheen has probed the representation of Arabs in cinema

"What's the outcome?" asks Shaheen. "What do Arabs think of us [Americans] that see these movies showing us killing them? Does this bring us closer together or does it separate us?"

Naïve Hollywood

Actor Richard Gere countered that Hollywood studios are actually less crafty than most of the public gives them credit for. "I just don't think that there's a cabal. I think it's much more naïve than that. I think that filmmaking in America is incredibly naïve," he said.

"The storytelling, almost by its nature is very cynical. So essentially the villain of the piece is whoever the villain on the planet is at that moment. Obviously the Russians were at one point, the Japanese were at another, the Germans were at another point."

But Arab actors trying to make it in Hollywood complain that it is a constant challenge not to get typecast in the role of a terrorist or ruffian.

Bashar Da'as, a Palestinian actor looking for work in Los Angeles, says he has been offered many roles to play a terrorist by big production houses but virtually nothing else.

"The only roles open to Arabs are the terrorist parts and if it's not a terrorist then it's a role that de-humanises Arabs and Muslims and that's even worse," he said.

Da'as plays himself in *Driving to Zigzagland*, a film showing at the festival about a Palestinian cab driver in Los Angeles struggling to find acting work.

Harming Arab students

"In other auditions, they wanted me to do something that I knew in my heart would harm people," Da'as explained. "*CSI Miami* actually liked me. They said the character fit me precisely. But he conspires with the Nazi groups, which is nonsense. I mean a Muslim extremist working with a Nazi group to kidnap a school? And my role in the show was to put a gun to a little boy. You can imagine how harmful that image would be to Arab students who go study in the US."



Driving to Zigzagland tells the story of a Palestinian actor looking for work

Da'as rejected the offer, along with all other terrorist roles that came his way. "I tried

to give them a history lesson, but the people in the business, they don't really care," he said.

Stone elaborated on the challenges he faces moving away from Hollywood cliché. "If we want to make a film about China or Turkey or wherever, we have to have a Western protagonist to kick it off. The same thing is true everywhere else. These are barriers that are going up around the world, partly through ignorance," he said.

"Richard [Gere] and I have faced this problem for years. You cannot make a movie about any subject without a Western protagonist. It is a major problem. But it's not just in America, it's everywhere."

Source: Al Jazeera

Monday, December 18, 2006

Survival in a land of absurd questions fueled by grassroots ignorance

Nicole Ballivian's 'Driving to Zigzigland' explores the reality gap between America and Palestine

By Jim Quilty

Daily Star staff

DUBAI: "When everyone's asleep, Jerusalem is like a coffin," a young Palestinian muses to the nighttime streets. "It's depressing and beautiful at once. Even when you're being arrested by Israeli soldiers, the city smells of the sweetness of the Bible. When you're being walked to your cell, your footsteps are the ones the prophets took before you."

The man's name is Bashar (Bashar Daas), and his stories are the stuff of Nicole Ballivian's "Driving to Zigzigland." One of an array of films featured at the 2006 Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF), it fits into a cinematic tradition that turns the American dream on its head.

Shot on location in Los Angeles and between Ramallah and Jerusalem, the core of "Zigzigland" is a loosely assembled collection of poignant and often very funny anecdotes from a day in the life of Bashar, who's emigrated to the US to pursue his career. He's taken a job as a taxi driver. This isn't uncommon for an actor, of course, and it's particularly useful for Bashar, who's picky about the roles he takes. One day, two casting directors ask him to read for a part in which his character prepares to behead an American prisoner tied to a chair.

"Where's my steak?" he asks the man in Arabic, pacing the room menacingly. "I'm very hungry!" He turns on his fellow actor and raises his empty hand, screaming: "My God! I want four pieces of falafel!"

The casting directors leap to their feet and offer him the job immediately.

"No," Bashar apologizes. "I can't play a terrorist."

"Well," the director protests. "It's more of an Islamist extremist, actually."

Bashar arrived in the US the day George W. Bush was "elected" president. Since then, he's married an American woman (Nicole Ballivian, his partner in real life) and awaits a green card in post-9/11 America.

On the day that bounds the film, Bashar must raise enough money to pay his utility bill. But the challenge gradually expands to include the US Department of Homeland Security, the FBI and his cousin, just arriving from Palestine. As the obstacles pile up, the sum of money required rises, too.

The story moves back and forth from the US to Palestine, providing vignettes of Bashar's life in both settings. The US scenes are dominated by the wildlife he encounters in his taxi and his observations - from the drug addict who pays his fare with a \$50 bill and a bag of cocaine to the innumerable nighttime fares who either refuse to pay or are too drunk to do so.

Then there are Bashar's encounters with American authority figures.

"In your film work," an FBI man asks, "have you ever noticed any stockpiles of weapons?"

"A few props sometimes," he answers. "Why?"

"Have you ever seen a film being made of a guerrilla training camp?" the FBI man asks. "Do you know anyone who wants to jihad America?"

Many of Bashar's customers want to know where he's from. He usually tells them that he's from Zigzigland. "It's not that I hate confrontation or am ashamed of my heritage," he reflects. "[But] I don't want it to get to the point where I want to throw someone out of my cab because they support the Israeli occupation. Sometimes I tell people it's just left of Malta or between Spain and China."

Zigzigland might be a place where people treated each other with respect, he says, but ultimately he realized "the American dream is just a Zigzigland dream. There is no Zigzigland. There's only struggle and survival and if God loves you, you get a green card."

Daas and Ballivian, who co-wrote the script, are critical of America's grassroots ignorance. But "Zigzigland" paints neither Bashar nor the Palestinians as pure-hearted angels.

"Zigzigland" had its world premiere at the Cairo International Film Festival earlier this month. It didn't take any prizes but was greeted with enthusiasm. In Dubai "Zigzigland" screened in the "Arabian Nights" program - not qualifying for competition, Ballivian explains, because she's not a citizen of an Arab country.

"People either love this film or they hate it. They don't like the politics and feel we're trying to force our opinions on them."

"I think this film is perfectly appropriate for an American audience," says Daas. "Everybody's been in a cab at one time or another."

The stories themselves and Daas' appealing screen presence are, in fact, the strongest facets of the film. As in so many low-budget first features, the cinematography and soundtrack have a handmade quality.

The shoot lasted just 21 days. Ballivian used two cinematographers - one in the US; one in Palestine. The difference between them is palpable. The American scenes are frenetic and anonymous. The Palestinian scenes are colorfully static.

"Stasis is a metaphor for modern Palestine under the occupation," says Ballivian. "The state of mind is more stable there. In [Los Angeles] the character is running around demeaning himself in order to pay the utility bills."

"Zigzigland" originated in her desire to make her own film after working as an assistant director for years and to provide a role worthy of Daas' skills.

"We've been working very hard on a film called 'Sleeping on Stones,'" Ballivian says, "about three 10-year-old boys - two Palestinians and an Israeli-American - and how their friendship breaks apart as they get older. We want to tell all - ordinary Israeli citizens never have access to the settlements - but at the same time we want to make the reality digestible. 'Zigzigland' is also a means to get our names into the market so that people know we can make a film."

Motives aside, Daas and Ballivian have assembled an entertaining piece of popular cinema. It's not without its challenges, though.

"Cairo told us that we could expect around 10 people for the competition screenings" Ballivian recalls. "But we had full houses. I don't know how it'll fly in the US, though, to

be honest."

A case in point is the film's Palestine denouement, which opens in the classroom of their daughter, who's ably reciting a poem by Mahmoud Darwish.

"You've stolen the orchards of my ancestors and the land they've cultivated, along with my children," enunciates the little girl. "You left nothing for us nor our grandchildren ... therefore write down on the top of the first page, I do not hate people, nor encroach [upon them] but if I become hungry, the usurpers' flesh shall be my food. Beware of my hunger, and my anger."

It's an astonishing segment, both for the little girl's great charm and the power of the words. But Western or apolitical audiences may well have problems with it.

"The poem sounds really strong when you read it in the subtitles," admits Daas. "But no Arab would interpret these lines literally. Anyway, Darwish has long ago outgrown the position he took in this poem."

"Westerners will take the poem more literally than it was intended," Ballavian adds. "But then Palestinian children are more politically aware and sophisticated than kids are in Europe and America."

"You're born into occupation and you have a gun in your face every day," Daas says. "The occupation rapes you and uses a condom ... It's so systematic that it knows how to remove the pressure when it sees you are on the verge of exploding. They release the pressure. Then they put it back. Even if you do read the poem literally, it's unfair to read it with an American mind - just as it is to judge America with a Palestinian mind."

For more information on "Driving to Zigzigland," please contact nicole@drivingtozigzigland.com

THE DAILY STAR

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TABLOID

ENTERTAINMENT

Published: 12/12/2006 12:00 AM (UAE)

Critic's choice: December 12

Mohammed Rouda

Driving to Zigzigland

The 9/11 attacks has inspired many filmmakers, some making films about the attacks themselves, while others have focused on the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This film chronicles a day in the life of an Arab taxi driver in Los Angeles and portrays the social struggle of Arab immigrants in post-9/11 America.

Being a cabbie gives a chance to listen to passengers' conversations on various issues. The cab driver comes to the attention of the FBI on charges of belonging to Al Qaida. Directed by Nicole Ballivian and starring Bashar Da'as and Simon Anglo.

Showing at 18.00 at Cinestar 1, Mall of the Emirates.

A film on experience of an immigrant

By a staff reporter

15 December 2006

DUBAI — Shot in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Los Angeles, *Driving to Zigzigland*, screened this week at the Dubai International Film Festival, is based on the real life experience of a Palestinian immigrant in the US after 9/11.

The utilities are due, and aspiring actor Bashar has 24 hours to make the money. Stress and pressure increase manifold as an unceasing flow of passengers stirs debates—and diatribes—on suicide bombers, George Bush, Cat Stevens, the war in Iraq, and more.

Meanwhile, Bashar finds he has once again been typecast as an Al Qaeda operative, and is under investigation by the Department of Homeland Security. The film's director, Nicole Ballivian, and star, Bashar Da'as, are a real-life husband-wife team who met in Jerusalem. They married and moved to Hollywood, where, like the character he plays in the film, Bashar drove a cab while attending audition after audition. He found it nearly impossible to fetch a role other than that of a terrorist.

Meanwhile, Nicole struggled to find funds for her debut feature. They finally blew their frustrations together to create the script for *Driving to Zigzigland*, which is based on the stories that Bashar would bring home from his taxi every night. It is Nicole's directorial debut.

Nicole Ballivian and Bashar Da'as were present when their film was screened on Tuesday, December 12 at 12:30 pm at Mall of the Emirates Theatre 11, and on Wednesday, December 13 at 6:00 pm at Mall of the Emirates Theatre 1.

THE DAILY STAR

EGYPT

THEY MAY NOT HAVE CAUSED A STIR AT THE CAIRO FILM FESTIVAL, BUT DIGITAL films ARE SET TO TAKE OVER THE FILMMAKING WORLD

By Farah El Alfy

First Published: December 14, 2006

In the Cairo [International Film Festival](#) (CIFF), a new category emerged this year called "digital films". Many viewers were unfamiliar with the term, and due to poor advertising this category was underestimated.

Digital films are those filmed with digital cameras, rather than the traditional 35-millimeter film camera used in [cinema](#). Evidently these films cannot compete in the main category since [digital production](#) has not yet achieved the visual perfection as cinema, although it is improving more and more each day.

Many international film festivals have included a digital film category — the prestigious [Cannes Film Festival](#) is no exception.

On the eighth floor of the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Cairo, in a tiny theater, some gathered to see some of the world's top digital films. "In general this category was low-key, but some films like "Everything" and "Driving to Zigzigland" were very well attended," says Omar Shama who worked on the management team of the festival.

British [filmmaker](#) Richard Hawkins (known for scripting the high budget film "The Theory of Flight" in 1998) attended the festival to show "Everything" — a film about a man's platonic relationship with a prostitute. The film actually ran in British [theaters](#) for five days, which is unusual for a digital film. At the CIFF, it won second place in the digital film category.

Italian digital [feature film](#) "Sotto La Stessa Luna" (Beneath the Same moon) by director Carlo Luglio, won the grand prize at the festival in this section.

Although Nicole Ballivian's film "Driving to Zigzigland" did not win anything at the festival, it was perhaps the most talked about of these films. The American filmmaker tells the true story of her husband, a Palestinian actor who moves to [Hollywood](#) to pursue his dream. Instead he ends up becoming a taxi driver, and is eventually deported back to Palestine.

This pro-Arab film was shot between Jerusalem and Los Angeles in 15 days and cost a minimal \$10,000.

Digital filmmaking is considered a revolution in [filmmaking](#). Digital is much cheaper, and much simpler. Digital cameras eliminate the need for external reels; upload easily on to computers and make editing a lot less of a nightmare, compared to analogue, and makes it easier to synchronize audio and video.

Although today high-budget films are made with celluloid cameras because of the high visual quality, in the next two years digital will catch up and be equal in quality. Already big Hollywood productions like "Superman Returns" are have used digital cameras and quite rapidly film cameras will become vintage along with walkmans, record players and Rubik's cube.



UAE

Reuters Television Transcript

MOD-DATE: 12/14/06 18:04:14

MIDEAST2-DEC14-UAE-U.S.-PALESTINIAN FILM

MIDEAST2: STORY M404

U.S.-PALESTINIAN FILM
DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES/ VARIOUS FILM LOCATIONS
DECEMBER14,2006 FILE
NATURAL WITH ARABIC AND ENGLISH SPEECH
DURATION:03:55

SOURCE:REUTERS

FEED HISTORY:MER2 (1830GMT)

INTRO: '**Driving to Zigzigland**', being screened at Dubai's International Film Festival examines the challenges Arab immigrants face in the U.S.

TV AND WEB RESTRICTIONS~NONE**~**

SHOWS:

(MER2) DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (DECEMBER 14, 2006) (REUTERS - ACCESS ALL)

1. CLOSE OF BURJ AL ARAB HOTEL
2. WIDE OF MADINAT JUMEIRA RESORT WHERE THE DUBAI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL IS BEING HELD
3. SCULPTURE OF FILM REEL PROMOTING THE DUBAI FILM FESTIVAL
4. VARIOUS OF FILMMAKER, ACTOR AND PRODUCER AT FILM FESTIVAL

(MER2) VARIOUS FILM LOCATION (FILE) (HANDOUT - ACCESS ALL)

5. VARIOUS FILM CLIPS FROM NICOLE BALLIVIAN'S 'DRIVING TO ZIGZIGLAND'

(MER2) DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (DECEMBER 14, 2006) (REUTERS - ACCESS ALL)

6. (SOUNDBITE) (English) NICOLE BALLIVIAN, DIRECTOR, SAYING:

"We made it to show the immigrants, the potential immigrants coming to America, what it is really like once you come here. It doesn't matter if you are a doctor or an engineer, when you come to America, you usually most of the time, have to start at the lower rung of society. It is also for the American audience to humanise the taxi cab driver that you are riding in the car with, to humanise an Arab that you have a stereotype about, so it is for both - both the American audience and the Arab audience."

(MER2) VARIOUS FILM LOCATION (FILE) (HANDOUT - ACCESS ALL)

7. VARIOUS FILM CLIPS FROM NICOLE BALLIVIAN'S 'DRIVING TO ZIGZIGLAND'

(MER2) DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (DECEMBER 14, 2006) (REUTERS - ACCESS ALL)

8. (SOUNDBITE) (Arabic) BASHAR DA'AS, ACTOR, SAYING:

"All the auditions that I was involved in were either about (playing the part of a) terrorist or an Arab who is ignorant, dirty and most of the time, they would say to me 'you are too handsome for this role'. They want someone ugly, someone who has a scared face. This is the image they have about Arabs - that they are ugly, people who do not shower, who live in tents, who do not drive cars and who are uncivilised."

(MER2) VARIOUS FILM LOCATION (FILE) (HANDOUT - ACCESS ALL)

9. VARIOUS FILM CLIPS FROM NICOLE BALLIVIAN'S 'DRIVING TO ZIGZIGLAND'

(MER2) DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (DECEMBER 14, 2006) (REUTERS - ACCESS ALL)

10. (SOUNDBITE) (English) NICOLE BALLIVIAN, DIRECTOR, SAYING:

"They are doing an amazing job, even at the festival here in Dubai, they are doing an amazing job humanising Arabs, whether they are in America or back home and their struggles so I see that happening a lot. I just came back from Cairo and I saw a lot a great films there and the ones here in Dubai (they) are actually doing that. And I think it is important that the independent filmmakers keep going, keep getting financing for these films that er humanising the Arab community all over the world."

STORY: Bashar Daas comes from Zigzigland, an imaginary country just below South America where people respect Arabs and he always has cash to pay the utility bills.

It's not that Daas is ashamed of admitting he is Palestinian in Hollywood but, as a taxi driver waiting for his big break in acting, he wants to avoid the inevitable political debate once passengers realise "that is where suicide bombers come from".

"Driving to Zigzigland" takes a wry look at the experiences of Arabs in the United States since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks were carried out by 19 young Arab men.

It follows Daas, who plays himself, as he tries to raise in 24 hours enough cash to pay a bill and stop the U.S. Department of Homeland Security from deporting him. In that time, a flow of passengers engage him on everything from whether U.S. soldiers should be in Iraq to whether Cat Stevens has joined al Qaeda.

"We made it to show the immigrants, the potential immigrants coming to America, what it is really like once you come here. It doesn't matter if you are a doctor or an engineer, when you come to America, you usually most of the time, have to start at the lower rung of society. It is also for the American audience to humanise the taxi cab driver that you are riding in the car with, to humanise an Arab that you have a stereotype about, so it is for both - both the American audience and the Arab audience," said Nicole Ballivian an American who wrote and directed "Zigzigland", a small-budget production in which all the actors and crew worked for free.

In the film, Daas shows up to a movie audition, only to find out he would be playing a terrorist. He turns the job down.

In another scene, Daas's American wife, played by Ballivan, invites her friends to watch a historical documentary about the "Aztec Temple of Death" in which he briefly appears.

"All the auditions that I was involved in were either about (playing the part of a) terrorist or an Arab who is ignorant, dirty and most of the time, they would say to me 'you are too handsome for this role'. They want someone ugly, someone who has a scared face. This is the image they have

about Arabs - that they are ugly, people who do not shower, who live in tents, who do not drive cars and who are uncivilised," said Daas.

The film sends up the U.S.-led war on terror and mocks the misconceptions Arabs face in the United States.

In one scene, an FBI agent shows up at Daas's flat to ask if he knows anyone who is planning "jihad". In another, a Jewish couple mistake Daas for an Israeli and agree that eliminating the Palestinians could be a good idea. Only when he has dropped his passengers off does Daas drop his bombshell.

Speaking about the film festival currently underway, the young director said:

"They are doing an amazing job, even at the festival here in Dubai, they are doing an amazing job humanising Arabs, whether they are in America or back home and their struggles so I see that happening a lot. I just came back from Cairo and I saw a lot a great films there and the ones here in Dubai (they) are actually doing that. And I think it is important that the independent filmmakers keep going, keep getting financing for these films that er humanising the Arab community all over the world."

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